

Secondary publication on the edoc server of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

<https://doi.org/10.18452/21587>

This is an **Accepted Manuscript** of an article published by Taylor & Francis in  
Innovation - European Journal of Social Science Research in 2004, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1351161042000190718>

Originally published as:

Timothy Moss and Heidi Fichter (2004) Promoting Sustainable Development in EU  
Structural Funds Programmes: Lessons from Regional Case Studies, *Innovation -  
European Journal of Social Science Research* 17:1, 11-23

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1351161042000190718>

**Promoting Sustainable Development in EU Structural Funds Programmes:  
Lessons from Regional Case Studies**

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**Abstract**

*This paper summarises the main results from a study into methods of implementing sustainable development principles in EU Structural programmes. It demonstrates how 12 pilot regions translated the concept of sustainable development into practical applications which are compatible with structural funding procedures, relevant to the needs of specific programme areas and acceptable to programme partnerships. The selected regions – from France, Germany, the UK,*

*Sweden and the Netherlands – vary considerably in terms of their size and structural characteristics. These differences had an important bearing on the paths they chose to integrate sustainable development principles into their Structural Funds programmes and management practices.*

*Conclusions are drawn on how other regions might promote sustainable development in the context of Structural Funds programmes on the basis of these experiences in terms of developing new methodologies, redesigning programme objectives, adapting management tools and opening up procedures to greater participation and dialogue.*

## **Introduction**

Sustainable development has been elevated to a 'horizontal principle' for all EU Structural Funds programmes according to the new regulations for the funding period 2000-2006 (European Commission, 1999). This requirement poses a major challenge to programme managers and project applicants. Programmes and projects will in future need to show that they are pursuing the fundamental Structural Funds objectives of stimulating economic development, creating jobs and combating social exclusion with greater respect for the environment as well as greater consideration for the interrelationship between economic, social and environmental dimensions.

This paper summarises the main results from a study, funded by DG Research with the support of DG Regio, into methods of implementing sustainable

development principles in EU Structural programmes (Moss and Fichter, 2000; Fichter and Moss, 2001).<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates how the regions translated the concept of sustainable development into practical applications which are compatible with structural funding procedures, relevant to the needs of specific programme areas and acceptable to programme partnerships.

The participating regions<sup>2</sup> – from France, Germany, the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands – vary considerably in terms of their size and structural characteristics. Some are sparsely populated, peripheral regions with few towns and a large rural hinterland (Highlands and Islands, Norra Norrlandskusten, Odermündung). At the other extreme are two metropolitan regions with large populations of high density (Berlin, Nordrhein-Westfalen). The remaining 7 regions are all former industrial areas with average population densities. They comprise either a homogenous territorial unit (Anhalt-Bitterfeld-Wittenberg, Groningen-Drenthe, West Cumbria and Furness) or a number of separate territories (Eastern Scotland, Aquitaine, Haute-Normandie, Midi-Pyrénées). These structural differences – as well as their very different institutional settings, socio-economic needs and environmental qualities – had an important bearing on the paths they chose to integrate sustainable development principles into their Structural Funds programmes and management practices.

The motives for undertaking the pilot projects of the twelve participating regions indicate not only what strategic importance was attached to the projects and the learning process they entailed but also why the task of promoting sustainability via

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<sup>1</sup> This paper incorporates parts of an article published in the journal *Sustainable Development* 11(1), February 2003, pp.56-65.

<sup>2</sup> The twelve regions were selected following a call on the initiative of DG Regional Policy and Cohesion which established a programme of pilot projects with the aim of preparing and accompanying the implementation of sustainable development via Structural Funds programmes. The pilot programme was started in mid-1998 and ended at the end of 1999. The ability of the regions to complete their pilot projects within the tight time

Structural Funds was interpreted in different ways in the 12 regions. Some general motives apply to most, if not all, of the pilot regions. One particularly pressing incentive was to help meet the Commission's requirement for sustainable development to be incorporated as one of two 'horizontal principles' into all Structural Funds programmes in the period 2000 – 2006. By conducting a pilot study of how to strengthen the commitment to sustainable development in their own Structural Funds programmes and by exchanging experiences in a European network of the 12 participating regions and Commissions officials, the regions expected to gain advance knowledge and experience on how to fulfil the new requirement. In many cases the regions were responding in addition to the growing importance of sustainability as a policy issue for national governments and regional or local authorities.

Conclusions are drawn on how other regions might promote sustainable development in the context of Structural Funds programmes on the basis of these experiences in terms of developing new methodologies, redesigning programme objectives, adapting management tools and opening up procedures to greater participation and dialogue.

### **Regional responses to five key problem issues**

We begin with a comparative analysis of the experiences of the 12 pilot projects, focusing on the way the regions addressed five key challenges which they all tried to master in the course of their activities to promote sustainable development in their Structural Funds programmes. These were:

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schedule was a significant factor behind their selection. The 12 regions selected were in

1. Building an shared understanding of sustainable development in each region
2. Developing tools for measuring sustainability
3. Building partnership for sustainability
4. Improving programme management procedures to promote sustainable development
5. Linking EU structural funding to other instruments for sustainable

These key challenges were not selected at random but emerged in the course of the research and in discussion with the participants on ways of coping with the task of promoting sustainability in structural funding. Each of the pilot regions approached the five key challenges with different intensity, some for instance putting more emphasis on building a shared understanding of sustainability and others on developing tools and instruments for measuring sustainable regional development. These differences depended largely on their former experiences, their cultural and institutional background as well as on the role of key players who pushed the projects forward in different ways.

#### *Building a shared understanding of sustainable development*

Creating a shared understanding of sustainable development in a region or locality depends to a great extent on being able to blend the views and interests of regional stakeholders with the basic principle of the concept, building on – rather than challenging – past policies and practices. A powerful message emerging from the pilot projects is the need to keep discussions on sustainability focused on the specific circumstances and needs of the locality or region and to define sustainable

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no way intended to be representative.

objectives which make common sense connections between economic, social and environmental issues at programme and project level. An important benefit of debates on sustainability within regional partnerships is that they can open up new ways of looking at development issues which shed fresh light on the strengths and weaknesses of a region or on the long-term impact of programme measures and objectives, particularly if they draw on the experiences of a wide range of regional actors. In practical terms the process of developing a common understanding and vision of sustainable development for the region can be stimulated with a number of proven tools and methodologies – such as the use of simple diagrams or qualitative SWOT analyses – which help reduce the complexity of the sustainability concept and make the advantages of a more sustainable approach more visible and tangible. It is important to invest considerable time and resources in such a process and to ensure that expectations are not unduly raised.

### *Developing tools for measuring sustainability*

The experience of developing tools such as programme assessment exercises, project selection criteria and indicator systems has lent extra weight to the growing recognition that beyond their technical value in programme management these tools serve far wider ranging functions. They can help raise awareness and develop a shared understanding of sustainability amongst regional partners, stimulate interest in sustainable projects and modify existing proposals. These broader functions need to be considered when adapting existing selection criteria or indicators to accommodate sustainable development objectives. They also have a significant bearing on how and when the tool should be used: whether in a pro-active way, involving a wider range of players than usual or with greater emphasis on advice and

guidance. Overall, a powerful message emerged from the pilot projects of the need for more open and less 'defensive' or restrictive applications of programme management tools. Consideration needs to be given to adapting sustainability criteria and indicators for other policy levels to meet specific regional or local development objectives and to ensuring compatibility between tools for project selection, monitoring and programme assessment. Particular care should be taken to keeping the number of indicators small and manageable, devising ways of cross-sectoral linkage and considering aspects of sustainable development difficult or impossible to quantify.

### *Building partnerships for sustainability*

Despite very different institutional and cultural backgrounds the pilot regions drew very similar recommendations on partnerships to promote sustainability. In general, the process of building quality regional partnerships needs careful prior consideration of the intended purpose of a partnership, the potential members, the structure and operational procedures and the institutional framework within which it will operate. It is necessary, for instance, to consider what aspect or stage of a Structural Funds programme a partnership is to address and what results it can realistically achieve in the time available. More specifically, it is very important to get key actors of programme management – especially government agencies – involved in the partnership at an early stage. Secondly, a sensitive external facilitator can have a major impact on the quality of a partnership, encouraging an open exchange of views, making participants feel responsible for the partnership and providing expertise when requested. Thirdly, partnerships should not be rushed – the process of building up a regional partnership takes time. Fourthly, discussions should focus

firmly on the needs of the region and the experiences and skills of the participants. Fifthly, the expectations of the participants should not be raised beyond what can realistically be achieved with the available resources. Finally, it is important to show the results from the workshops will be used or taken forward; without this, participants will be discouraged from attending future meetings. Bearing these lessons in mind a powerful partnership can be built up capable of making programme development and project selection more effective and lending greater legitimacy and transparency to the decision making process, as recent EU-funded research has shown (The Tavistock Institute, 1999; Schleicher-Tappeser and Strati, 1999).

*Improving programme management procedures to promote sustainable development*

The new 'horizontal priority' of sustainable development for the funding period 2000-2006 presents a challenge to existing procedures of programme management at regional, national and EU levels. The need to pay greater attention than in the past to the interrelationship between economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection demands altered or new procedures for allocating funds, providing advice and giving other kinds of incentives to applicants to submit sustainable projects. On the basis of their experiences the 12 pilot regions have made a number of suggestions for improving procedures for managing Structural Funds programmes to accommodate better sustainable development objectives. One group of suggestions is directed at the European Commission. It includes appeals for greater technical assistance to provide a more wide-ranging programme of advice and guidance to programme managers and project applicants and new funding mechanisms to encourage innovative – and risk-intensive – projects and small, less experienced applicant teams. Other suggestions are targeted at national and regional



governments or the regional partnership itself. These include proposals to introduce a global grant for greater regional self-responsibility to programme management, a financial bonus system for rewarding projects which meet regionally specified sustainability criteria, mechanisms for area targeting and a more extensive regional programme of training and advice to raise awareness of how sustainable objectives could be practically integrated into project proposals. It is important, when considering changes to management procedures, to take into account the established institutional practices and policy styles of the respective Member State. This applies in particular to potential areas of incompatibility between the discursive, participatory approaches deemed necessary to promote sustainable development and the more closed, technocratic procedures of Structural Funds management favoured in some countries.

### *Linking policy instruments for sustainable regional development*

Structural Funds programmes are only one – albeit very important – instrument of regional development. If they are to exploit their full potential to promote sustainable development they will need to link in with other instruments of regional policy. These include other sources of funding from the EU, such as the CAP, and from national governments (e.g. the Lottery in the UK or the Joint Programme in Germany), spatial and sectoral planning at national, regional and local levels as well as other regional and local initiatives towards sustainable development such as Local Agenda 21. Even though the 12 pilot projects did not place much emphasis on this issue there was widespread recognition of the importance of policy linkage for Structural Funds programmes. In particular, the pilot regions recommended paying greater attention to ensuring the compatibility and complementarity between the

various funding programmes with a view to maximising the potential they each provide for promoting sustainable development. A second recommendation was to improve coordination with regional planning, which in many EU countries today has adopted sustainable development as a key policy objective. The cross-sectoral nature of sustainable development is lending additional weight to the argument that Structural Funds procedures need to be better embedded in a wider regional policy context.

### **Diverse pathways towards sustainable development**

The strict regulations and guidelines on the management of Structural Funds programmes mean that sustainable development will need to be integrated into all phases of programme management, from the preparation of programming documents to the procedures for selecting projects, monitoring the programme's process and evaluating the performance of programme and projects. Since the task is the same for all programme areas one might expect them to pursue it in a similar manner. In the case of the 12 pilot regions examined here this expectation was reinforced by the fact that they were asked to apply and test the same methodology, developed by ECOTEC, for integrating sustainable development into Structural Funds programmes (ECOTEC, 1997).

Nevertheless, the 12 pilot regions approached the five key challenges in very different ways. These differences related to: the purpose of the pilot projects, the

interpretations of sustainable development used, the management tools they addressed, the methods of analysis applied and the kinds of stakeholders involved.

These multiple approaches and pathways were not selected at random. They emerged in response to the particular needs of the region and its Structural Funds programme – as defined by the project co-ordinators or participants – as well as the institutional tradition of programme management in the Member State. Indeed, each approach can be explained largely in terms of a combination of region-specific factors. These include primarily:

- particular needs emerging from the settlement structure, socio-economic development and environmental quality of the region,
- the role and the interests of the key regional players in structural funding programmes,
- existing partnerships and networks engaged in Structural Funds programmes in the region,
- particular national – and occasionally regional – policy styles, reflected in institutionalised procedures and responsibilities for managing structural funds,
- links to other policy priorities of regional development and strategies of development and/or spatial planning and
- past experience of sustainable development initiatives and projects in the region.

The clear message emerging from the pilot projects is that no single approach – or ‘way in’ – to promoting sustainability via structural funding was generally preferred over others. It would not appear helpful, therefore, to seek to define one approach universally applicable in all regions and in all circumstances. This leaves the question of how we can make useful sense out of the diversity of approaches. Do certain

approaches fit together to form 'pathways' clearly distinguishable from one another? By comparing the approaches of the 12 pilot regions it is possible to distinguish at least four 'pathways' which each reflect a number of similarities in the approaches taken. Defined in terms of how the task of promoting sustainability in structural funding was interpreted by the principal players, these four pathways can be described as follows:

### *1. Capacity building in the region and its localities*

The emphasis here is on engaging stakeholders in a process of discussion at regional and/or local level, using sustainable development as a conceptual tool for focusing debate. The rationale behind this pathway – as observed in Highlands and Islands, Odermündung and Midi-Pyrénées – is to strengthen and exploit the region's available human potential to solve its own development problems (Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Environmental Resources Management, 1999; Landkreis Ostvorpommern and Landkreis Uecker-Randow, 1999; ARPE / Region Midi-Pyrénées – Conseil Regional, 1999). Within the pilot projects considerable time and effort was spent, consequently, on developing sustainability objectives for the region or its localities acceptable to a broad partnership. The potential drawbacks of this pathway lie in the high transaction costs of co-ordinating wide, heterogeneous partnerships and the time lost for other important activities.

### *2. Adapting programme management tools and instruments*

Those regions which prefer to rely on instruments for measuring performance to achieve programme objectives or which already have active partnerships working towards sustainable development (such as Anhalt-Bitterfeld-Wittenberg) seek to

refine their existing management tools so as to accommodate the special requirements of the sustainability concept (AIRAIL KG / Sachverständigenbüro Dr. Kleinschmidt, 1999). As a rule this pathway engages a small number of experts commissioned to improve indicator systems or project selection criteria. The potential drawbacks here lie firstly in the difficulty of devising accurate yet comprehensive benchmarks for such a complex concept and secondly in the absence of wider discussions on sustainable development for the region.

### *3. Identifying and filling gaps in current and future programmes*

Although almost all regions began their pilot projects by assessing the contribution of the current programme to sustainable development, this activity was central to those regions – such as West Cumbria and Furness, Haute-Normandie and Nord-rhein-Westfalen – which aimed to identify those measures of the programme which held potential for sustainable development as yet under-exploited (ECOTEC, 1998; TAURUS-Institut, 1999). This pathway is very focused on programme design and relies heavily on desk-top analysis. For this reason it tends to engage in dialogue with regional stakeholders only when there are results to report.

### *4. Mobilising political support for a new focus to structural funding*

Here the emphasis lies on reaching an understanding of how sustainable development can be integrated into future programmes which is acceptable to the key players in programme management. This pathway – as practised by Eastern Scotland – engages with the main agencies and decision-makers of the programme partnership rather than with regional stakeholders as a whole (Eastern Scotland European Partnership, 1999). The interpretation of sustainability it seeks is not

visionary but incremental, building on what already exists so as to facilitate wide political support. For this reason the approach runs the risk of being hostage to political will. Publicising the results of the activity is an important part of the strategy.

Looking at these four regional pathways and considering them in the light of the regions' specific development factors we can draw parallels between different approaches and the development needs of the regions: e.g. the settlement structure in Odermündung or Highlands and Islands and the preference for strengthening local institutional capacity. In Midi-Pyrénées a similar approach was in part a reaction against the centralised system of programme management in France. Because several regional partnerships for sustainable development were already well established in Saxony-Anhalt, the Anhalt-Bitterfeld-Wittenberg region preferred to focus instead on refining its indicator system and the existence of a strong programme partnership in Eastern Scotland contributed to its important role on the pilot project.

These observations hold important lessons for other regions contemplating how to start a process of integrating sustainable development into their Structural Funds programme and which approach or pathway is best suited to their needs. Programme managers need to be aware of the factors which frame their available options. In general terms the suitability – and thus potential for success – of a particular approach would appear to be dependent to a considerable extent on the ability of the actors to address regionally specific problems in a manner which builds on, rather than challenges, existing practices of Structural Funds management.

Once a particular approach has been identified as suitable for the region it is important to define the practical steps – the ‘stepping stones’ – needed to progress along the chosen pathway. Although many of the 12 regions focussed on only one or two steps in the limited context of their pilot projects they all envisaged building on them with further steps in the future. For example, projects which concentrated on defining sustainability objectives for the region intend to develop these into project selection criteria; those which established selection criteria plan to use these as a basis for a system of sustainability indicators. A region-specific approach may prove important as a point of entry to the process of promoting sustainable development but not necessarily for consolidating and developing this process further. There is a potential danger that a region puts so much effort into perfecting its own approach that it overlooks the advantages of other pathways. In this situation a well-worn pathway could become a rut from which it is difficult to emerge. There is a need, therefore, for some self-critical reflection once a process has been established, looking across at alternative pathways for inspiration to improve even the more successful pathways.

### **Common lessons learned**

The important point is to treat the integration of sustainable development into Structural Funds programmes as a learning process. The point of entry to this learning process will be largely region-specific. What matters subsequently is that the process – once set in motion – is actively encouraged.

The 12 regions have demonstrated that it is possible to translate the concept of sustainable development into practical applications of structural funding procedures. Partnerships created to deliver economic development have made substantial progress in adapting to the wider demands of sustainable development. They have shown further how this is possible, in terms of developing new methodologies, redesigning programme objectives, adapting management tools and opening up procedures to greater participation and dialogue in order to accommodate the particular demands of sustainable development. An important key to their overall success has been to conceive of sustainability as a learning process towards a new development paradigm which should build on existing practices and reflect a region's specific needs and circumstances. In this way many regions have managed to avoid the negative image of sustainability as a complex, abstract concept, presenting it instead as an essentially simple idea based on making common sense connections and developing effective governance. It could be argued that by building on existing practices the regions restricted openings for more innovative ways of addressing the challenge of promoting sustainable development. The more successful pilot projects demonstrated, however, that embedding the pilot projects in existing structures and initiatives was central to their effectiveness ("mainstreaming sustainability"). Furthermore, where the exercise involved more than simply adding to existing practices but altering their orientation it could indeed prove highly innovative.

What are important components to this learning process towards more sustainable regional development? The IRS study identified 8 'common keys' to a successful learning process drawn from the reports and comments of the main actors involved in the 12 pilot projects. These are:



*1. Strengthening programme partnerships*

Stronger structural and procedural links – both vertical and horizontal – between relevant bodies (programme managers, public agencies, project applicants etc.) are particularly important to address the integrated, long-term demands of sustainable development.

*2. Encouraging greater participation and exchange of experiences*

Raising awareness and developing a shared vision of sustainable development for a programme area requires the engagement of a wide range of players and the effective use of their knowledge.

*3. Subsidiarity – capacity building at the local/regional level*

Sustainable regional development cannot be effectively prescribed from above – it is about building on and strengthening natural, economic and institutional resources at the local and/or regional level.

*4. Making the management of programmes more transparent*

In order to stimulate interest in sustainable development amongst project applicants and programme managers tools of project selection and assessment need to be developed and applied in a more open, less restrictive manner.

*5. Making small but visible changes in the right direction*

It is not helpful to approach sustainable development as a distant goal requiring major restructuring; more important is to emphasise the common sense connections behind an integrated approach to development and the gradual shifts towards a more sustainable future.

*6. Moving from bolt-on to integrated approaches to policy coordination*

Simply adding or strengthening environmental and social dimensions to Structural Funds programmes is inadequate; sustainable development requires an appreciation of how a programme or project can exploit synergies and overcome inconsistencies between economic, environmental and social aspects.

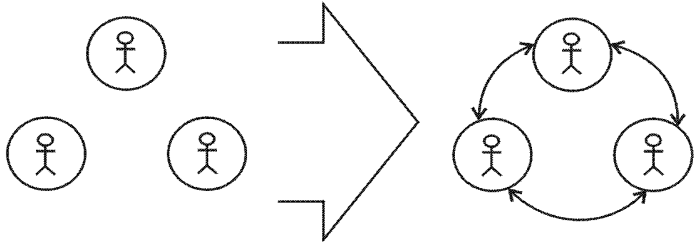
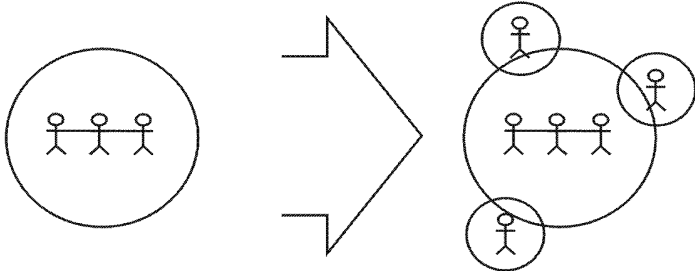
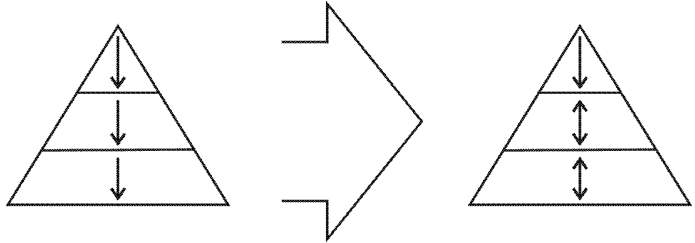
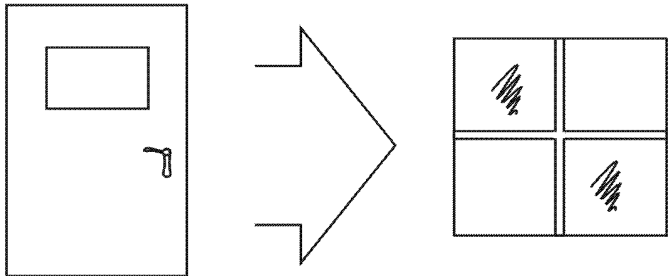
*7. Taking a longer term perspective on programme performance*

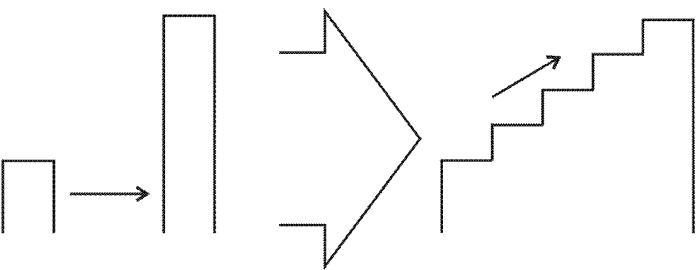
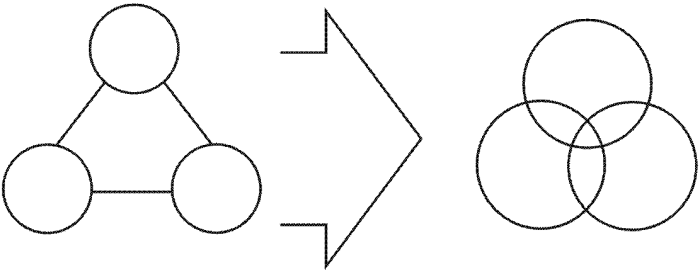
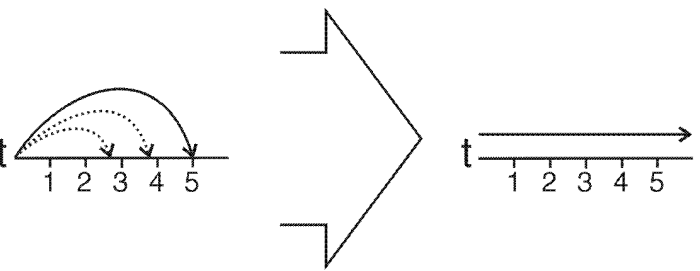
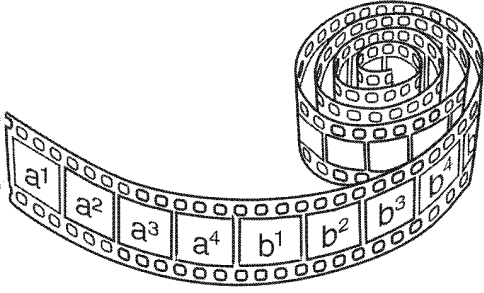
Sustainable development requires looking beyond the lifespan of a programme at the longer term impact of especially qualitative advances in a region's development.

*8. Adapting sustainability objectives to meet changing needs*

It is important to appreciate that sustainability objectives can change over time in response to altered circumstances or needs. Together these shifting objectives encourage a dynamic process of regional development – just as the changing shots of a film create a moving image.

The following figure presents these eight 'common keys to a successful learning process' in pictorial form.

<b>Promoting sustainable development via structural funding: common keys to a successful learning process</b>	
<p>Strengthening programme partnerships</p>	
<p>Encouraging greater participation and exchange of experiences</p>	
<p>Subsidiarity - capacity building at the local/regional level</p>	
<p>Making the management of programmes more transparent</p>	

<p>Making small but visible changes in the right direction</p>	
<p>Moving from bolt-on to integrated approaches to policy coordination</p>	
<p>Taking a longer term perspective on programme performance</p>	
<p>Adapting sustainability objectives to meet changing needs</p>	

Graphics: **IRS**

## **Conclusions: Implications for the research of sustainable regional development**

The study demonstrated, on the basis of empirical analysis of 12 regions, how the common task of promoting sustainable development in structural funding can be approached in very different ways and how important it is to develop an approach which reflects adequately the specific circumstances and needs of a region. The experiences from the regions send a powerful message that there is no single approach, or 'pathway', which is inherently better or more promising than others. There are, rather, a number of possible pathways which each have their own particular strengths and weaknesses. It is up to individual regions to decide for themselves which approach suits their particular needs and institutional context best.

These central observations of the study have far-reaching implications for research on sustainable regional development and, conversely, indicate areas of research which could offer important lessons for the practice of implementing sustainable development in structural funding but which – for various reasons – have not as yet been accessed by the sustainability literature.

To take the first part of this equation, there are at least four important implications for research on sustainable development which have emerged from this study. Firstly, research on the sustainable city or region should not be reduced to the search for a simple standardised definition or model. Researchers need to be looking for and explaining pathways towards different kinds of sustainable city or region. They need to be aware of different, even competing, visions of sustainability in various regions and within a single city or region.

It follows, secondly, that research should be trying to identify the source of these diverse interpretations of sustainability. We need to recognise how the sustainability question gets caught up, re-interpreted and recast in a whole range of debates about the future development of cities (cf. Guy et al., 2001). These debates may well not refer specifically to the issue of sustainable development but have a major bearing on how sustainability is interpreted for a region. The role of research should be to identify and unpack the competing claims for what the sustainable city or region might become and describe how these are framed or shaped by region-specific factors – environmental, economic, social, technical or institutional.

This requires, thirdly, researching the wide range of social interests competing and co-operating to promote their own notion of the sustainable city or region. In the past great emphasis has gone into developing models and instruments for action rather than investigating human factors shaping development strategies. Research needs to ask, for instance, who the relevant stakeholders are, what motives they pursue, what influence they possess and how they interact with one another. Similarly, little attention has been given as yet to the institutional framework within which these actors operate, despite clear evidence – substantiated in the 12 pilot regions – that established organisational structures, norms and procedures in each Member State have a major impact on programme management.

Fourthly, it is misleading to conceive of the planning and management of sustainable development as a linear process of clearly defined steps following each other in neat progression. Whilst a deterministic approach certainly provides useful

guidance in designing strategies for action, it encounters difficulties in situations where actors do not follow the inner logic or rationality of arguments to minimise resource use, for instance. This applies particularly to an open-ended, integrated concept like sustainable development. Research needs to pay greater attention in future to more flexible, reflexive forms of management capable of coping with diversity and uncertainty.

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